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Stephen Frosh on the Freud Family

A review of Daniel Benveniste's 'The Interwoven Lives of Sigmund, Anna and W. Ernest Freud.' From the June 10, 2015, issue of the Times Literary Supplement.

By STEPHEN FROSH
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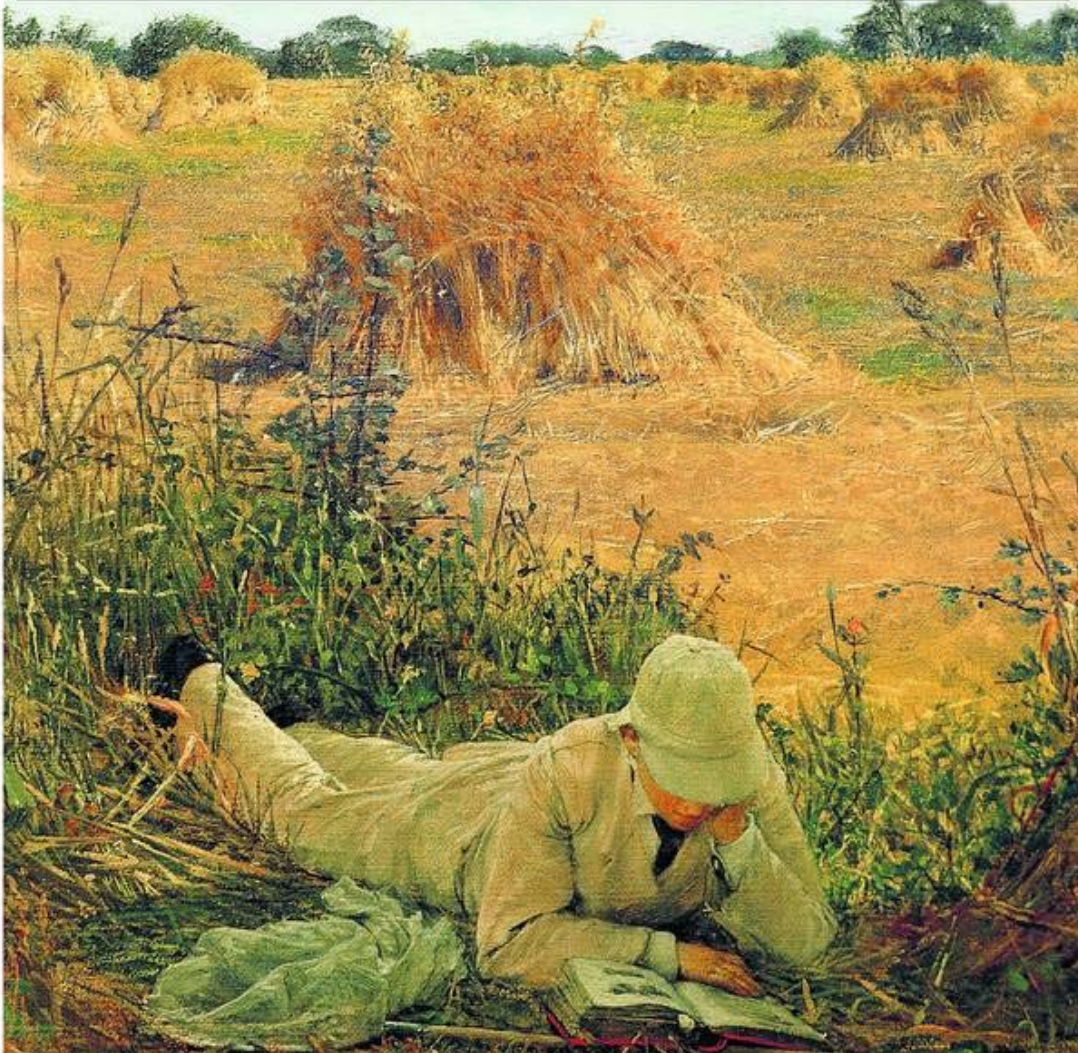
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ENLARGE

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The best-known moment of W. Ernest Freud's life came when he was just eighteen months old, in September 1915, and still called by his original name of Ernst Wolfgang Halberstadt. Grosspapa

Sigmund visited his daughter Sophie in her home in Hamburg and watched his little grandson at play. Ernst's simple game has become the most famous one in the history of psychoanalysis, and was made to bear an enormous weight of meaning in Freud's book *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920) – a book which delivered a radical refashioning of drive theory. *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* introduced the Death Drive, the incitement that repeats inside each of us to return to the dust whence we came, but also to make mischief and sow destruction along the way. By the time the book appeared, millions had been killed across Europe in the First World War; and Sophie too, Freud's "Sunday child", was dead of the Spanish flu, along with 20 million other people. Little Ernst's contribution towards this, in the happier time when his sweet and attentive mother was still alive, was to take a wooden reel and throw it into his curtained cot, so it would disappear from sight. "O-o-o-o", he would say, which his mother and grandfather translated as "fort", "gone"; and then, with a "joyful 'da'", he would draw the reel out again into the light. The game would be repeated tirelessly: fort and da, or at least that is what we assume Ernst was saying, gone and back again. Psychoanalysis would never be the same after this observation was written up, its essential nature as a practice of repetition becoming increasingly recognizable: over and over the same process, throwing something out of sight, drawing it back in again. Now we see it, now we don't; an infantile game that can sum up a whole lifetime.

To be a talisman of repetition like this, as well as the object of gaze of one of the most influential observers in history, might be a big enough burden for a small boy who later became a physically and – until his old age – mentally small man. What was harder still was the fact that some of the most important things that were thrown out of sight never came back. In this psychoanalytic biography, Daniel Benveniste spares us little of his sometimes excessive interpretive wisdom, but his analysis carries conviction here. The boy loved his mother intensely, and was in paradisaical contentment

with her when his father went away to war. But then came little brother Heinerle, as everyone called him, Ernst lost his special position and was pushed into the shadows. So far so normal, but Sophie's death destroyed the family and the prospect of ever recovering the lost haven. It was very sudden – she was ill for just five days – and very cruel; she was just twenty-six years old and pregnant with her third child. Freud was devastated, “the undisguised brutality of our time weighs heavily on us”, he wrote in a letter to Oskar Pfister; and to Sandor Ferenczi, “Wafted away! Nothing to say”. This last sounds like the child's perspective, fort and fort again. After this, Ernst was difficult and unrewarding; and while Heinerle was delighting everyone, his Tante Anna – always rivalrous with Sophie, it seems, and perhaps somehow now dealing with her own guilt – attended to him, offering him an anchor that was to be the steady point of his endlessly fretful life.



And then the turn of the screw: in 1923, aged only four, the angelic little brother was also lost to “military tuberculosis”, and even though a great deal of effort was put into stabilizing Ernst, everything fell apart. This moment, too, has become a heartbreaking one in the literature and biography, but of Grosspapa Freud rather than the little survivor. Do what he could, Freud could

not sympathize; he was too tied up in his own distress. “I find this loss very hard to bear, I don’t think I have ever experienced such grief”, he wrote at the time. Ernest Jones, one of his biographers, states that it was the only occasion on which Freud was known to shed tears, and that he said this loss had “killed something in him for good”; even three years later, writing to Ludwig Binswanger, whose own young child had just died, Freud commented, “For me, that child took the place of all my children and other grandchildren, and since then, since Heinerle’s death, I have no longer cared for my grandchildren, but find no enjoyment in life either”. In the aftermath of Heinerle’s death, Freud also wrote that Ernst provided no consolation, puncturing yet more of the young child’s narcissistic needs. When his mother died, Ernst seemed to show no emotion but in fact spent long periods on a homemade swing, the rhythmic fort–da maybe reassuring him; this time, it was only the heroic Anna, attending to him and supporting him and analysing him – her first child patient – who kept him in focus and maybe saved his life.

This is where, for most of us, Ernst drops out of sight, but in fact we have only got through about 10 per cent of Benveniste’s huge book. The early years keep returning, both in the beautiful and poignant baby diary that Sophie kept about Ernst, reproduced in English and German in the appendix, and in the continual psychoanalytic search for a developmental explanation of all that was to come. Ernst gradually drifted apart from his father Max Halberstadt, who married a woman Ernst did not take to (he felt betrayed there too – she was his governess, but fell in love with his father), and eventually went to live in South Africa, where Ernst was meant to join him, but did not. Anna Freud took over with a mixture of fierce rectitude and intellectual and analytic brilliance; she might have been domineering, but she was also the one secure point of Ernst’s life. Anna’s mother Martha, the undervalued Frau Professor, was also deeply significant: while Sigmund and Anna were busy, and everyone in the house had to be quiet in order not

to disturb their work with patients, Grossmama was always available, the major source of emotional nutrition to Ernst.

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Benveniste deploys his resources here with astute if laborious comprehensiveness. We read about Ernst's schooldays in the remarkable Hietzing School in Vienna, started up by Dorothy Burlingham, Anna's lifelong partner, where he was taught by the young Peter Blos and Erik Erikson. We read of his moves back and forth between Berlin and Vienna, returning "da" when the Nazis came; and of his terror of the Nazis and his awareness of the danger, even when the older Freuds were not so clear. Ernst then appears in London with his grandparents and Anna; he is interned as an "enemy alien" and is delighted to find that the Isle of Man is really a holiday camp, where he can get by doing more or less nothing at all. This seems to have defined him: a weak man, afraid of pain and suffering, unable to face fragility in those on whom he depended, eager to be gone. For example, Ernst probably did not attend his grandfather's funeral and he steered clear of Anna in her dying days, despite all she had done for him, and did not go to her funeral either. Benveniste comments that Ernst could not cope with the sight of Anna's frailty: "Seeing her like this was so difficult to bear that he stopped visiting her. Though he didn't rationalize his disappearance from the scene and was not proud of his behaviour, he simply couldn't tolerate seeing her like this. His 'other mother' was dying". Yes, we might think, but along with his evasiveness and his constant need to be looked after, and taking into account all the losses of the past and those to come (his son Colin, with whom he had a very strained relationship, was killed in an accident in 1987), one has to ask, does "not being able to tolerate" something excuse avoiding paying your dues?

Ernst's life was tied up with Tante Anna, who presided over his very slow and partial blossoming. Ernst – cousin, it should be

recalled, of the extraordinary Lucian and the eccentric Clement, and a member of a family that has over-achieved through many generations – was the only one of Freud’s grandchildren to become a psychoanalyst. In this respect as in many others, he was positioned as Anna’s son. She had inherited the psychoanalytic mantle from her father, and he might have done so from her. She showed him plenty of signs of preference, despite also trying to steer clear of charges of nepotism: he accompanied her across the road from 20 Maresfield Gardens to the Clinic; he sat by her when he could; he even, at times, saw his own patients on Freud’s sacred couch. And he was devoted to his aunt, despite his pathetic evasion at her death. Years later, in his conversations with his biographer, he was still fighting her side of the war with the Kleinians that took place from the 1940s onwards. “I almost tremble when people speak Kleinianese”, he comments, perhaps an understandable reaction at times, but one that also shows his lack of capacity to think for himself. This indeed seems to have been one of his many problems: his losses and uncertainties were largely hidden away, only imperfectly worked through in his own analysis, and what comes to the fore is his passivity, so he relied on various women (his wife, even after their divorce; his lovers; his aunt) and some men (his analyst; one or two long-term but at times frustrated friends) to make everything happen for him. In some respects this might have made him a good analyst. For instance, there is a touching tribute from one patient and hints from others that his “quiet” demeanour and sensitivity to his own insecurity might have been experienced as sympathetic devotion to their needs. But on the whole he drifted, unable to really build up a full analytic practice, feeling overlooked and neglected, full of grandiose schemes that came to nothing, constantly encountering loss.

Finally, almost in old age, Ernst found a way forward for himself in some acute and emotionally sensitive observations on perinatal care, and especially the needs of premature babies and their mothers. Ernst himself, prompted by Benveniste, linked this with

the loss of his brother – not Heinerle, but the unborn baby who died with Sophie. If that is so, then at least from this loss something creative arose and he gained a reputation, wrote many papers, and helpfully advanced psychoanalytic thinking. But he still kept running away, ending his days back in Germany, fading in his nineties in a way he had always feared, losing his memory just as his biographer was recovering it for him. Fort and da again, as Benveniste points out, though not necessarily in the upbeat way in which he tries to end the book. It is a sad tale, not of someone neglected – some very significant people put a lot of work into Ernst – but of someone who never really got going.

Benveniste's book is more of an archive than a biography. It is full of information on the Freuds' family life in the 1920s and 30s, and about Anna and her associates in London, as well as on Ernst's trajectory throughout. Much of the material is well known, but there is also a large amount of new detail, including Sophie's baby diary and an introduction to letters between her and her father that have not been seen before, and which Ernst seems not to have read until Benveniste arrived. A great deal of the work consists of verbatim interviews with Ernst and testimonies of various sorts – often remarkably open and even critical – from people who had known him and the others around him. Historically, this is an invaluable contribution. It doesn't really change much: Sigmund is still the extraordinary founder of the dynasty; Anna both dogmatic and profound, as well as intellectually exceptional. But it enhances the colour of what we know, gives some new perspectives (the strength and centrality of Martha in the Freud household, for instance) and brings to life an era and its aftermath. It also hints at what a psychoanalytic biography might look like, not so much through the unsatisfactory interpretive efforts to link Ernst's behaviour to his earliest experiences of loss, but through the powerful evocation of the bond between biographer and subject out of which the book grew.

Daniel Benveniste was attached to Ernst, and vice versa; as he acknowledges, something in each responded to what was present, and perhaps also what was lacking, in the other, making the enterprise of this biography viable. At the end of it, we know quite a lot about Ernst's relational capacities and limitations, and perhaps what it might mean to feel that one has a weight of expectation and entitlement to bear simply by virtue of one's name. However, there is a sting here: Ernst chose to take on the Freud name in London in 1951, while he was in training as a psychoanalyst. Was this a provocation, or an attempt to advance himself? Or was it more that by taking on the name, he thought he had done the work, become the great analyst? That he would become his grandfather or, more likely, his aunt? Perhaps this was the shadow over his destiny: to hope his wishes would become true just because they were his wishes, that the "da" could displace the "fort" without his actively pulling in the reel.